

# “The Basics of Christianity”

1<sup>st</sup> John 5:1-12 5/28/2000

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If you and I were able to get in a time machine and go back to the first century, we'd naturally want to speak with a few people to learn more in our Christian faith. If our time travel device could only go back to one time period, would you rather talk to people who were talking *about* Jesus and Christianity or talk to and listen to Jesus Himself?

Obviously we'd rather be around Jesus Himself – being among the people who were privileged to hear Him teach and see Him responding to people's personal problems and their pursuits to grow in their spiritual understanding. Perhaps we would be among groups of listeners depicted in Tissot's painting which appears on your bulletin cover.

We don't have a time machine but we do have the scriptures. Each Sunday we gather to study these passages. Today's text is from the epistles. Before it is read, there are a few things useful to know for the letter to make any sense to us today.

Tradition has it that the author of these three letters was John – the author of the gospel by that name.<sup>1</sup> If it was him, John was in his senior years, living out the remainder of his days in exile. He had carriers taking these messages back and forth to the church with which he was corresponding. He wrote these letters in response to trouble in this congregation with false teachers.

It is also true today, but the early churches were tempted to emphasize some parts of Christianity, to exclusion of others because of the pressure of their surrounding society. Their culture was secular and diverse in ways similar to our American lifestyle.

It was popular, in the educated sectors of their society,<sup>2</sup> to talk of wisdom and knowledge. As you would suspect, the most respected people in those times were the educators and philosophers.

Apparently a sizable percentage of the early Christians bought into an interpretation of Christianity called Gnosticism. It taught many interesting and strange things having to do with secret knowledge

James Tissot's  
“Jesus Teaching On the  
Sea Shore” c.1886-94 ➡



about Jesus – all of which was keeping with the Scriptures.

A part of the Gnostic heresy was a version of it called Docetism. Docetism was a Christian movement that emphasized, like Gnosticism, a special or secret knowledge. Docetic Gnostic Christians believed that Jesus *was* the revelation of God – the Revealer of God's truth. That seemed consistent with the other scriptures, but in proclaiming Christ to be God, they also went to the extreme of denying His humanity.

These people apparently thought that it is too embarrassing to have a crucified deity so they made Him out to be a phantom-like Being Who appeared and communicated truth but Who left the earth without going through suffering and death. Interestingly enough, in one of the Docetic writings about Jesus, it was said that during the crucifixion, people were looking at the scene from a distance and Jesus came up to them, in some form, and said, “You see the one in the middle? Most people think it's Me but it really isn't.” So there were teachers in the church, then, who emphasized the divinity of Christ and denied the humanity of Christ.

These teachers considered the teachings of this elder (or John) to be “inferior” – that he didn't have their “secret” knowledge. So in the most serious terms, John is warning the church about those who recognized Jesus as God but didn't consider Him to be fully human. Throughout these three letters, John is warning them about this false teaching and also trying to summarize some truths basic to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

As we hear this passage from the fifth chapter, notice the family metaphor. Listen for the importance of the belief that Jesus is God and the emphasis on the symbols of water, blood and the Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> Every time you repeat the so-called 6<sup>th</sup> century Apostle's Creed or the more wordy Nicene Creed, the phrases about Jesus dying and descending to hell were written in reaction to Christians who had ignored or downplayed Christ's humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Yet career New Testament scholars are not sure about it.

<sup>2</sup> Greek and Roman

## John 5:1-12 Reading

Hearing this fragment of scripture is like walking into a conversation already in progress. In the church, apparently there had been heated disagreements over their Christology (that is, their theology about Christ). Remember, this is the time in history when second-generation Christians were trying to determine, as best they could, what to consider orthodox and what to judge as heretical.

The writer's first point is that Christians are supposed to be making a community that is characterized by love – as in the love of a family. How does one know a loving Christian community when one sees it? By a love which results in obedience to God's commandments, says John. He says our knowledge about God is based on the analogy of the obedience and unity one sees in a healthy family.<sup>4</sup> But why is John writing about righteousness when the problem has to do with crooked theology?

Verse 4 goes on: "For whatever is born of God (or whatever comes out of the family of God people), overcomes the world and *this* is the victory that overcomes the world – our faith." He is saying that if those Christians stick to their faith in Christ and press on, the distortions of the world (like the false teaching they were hearing) will not ultimately ruin Christianity. They should resist the heresy to which they're being exposed – they should "keep the faith."

John continues, in verse 6, to talk about the reality of Christ's death by talking about water and blood. In verse 8, John mentions "Three witnesses:" the Spirit, the water and the blood. Using these three symbols, he goes on.

In verse 10: "Those who believe in the Son of God (already) have the testimony in their hearts." John is using symbolism that these Christians understood – they had previously heard him talk about the faith using these three symbols. They were John's favorite way to summarize the basic components of the Christian faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Remember what Jesus had said: "Unless your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." He's almost quoting Jesus, here, in going on to say that the God's commandments are not actually burdensome – like the rules that had been created by leaders in organized religion. As Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Even Paul had extensively talked about how Christianity is freedom from mere legalism.

The teachers with this phantom-like view of Christ thought it was impossible and ridiculous that God should suffer – so they didn't see Jesus' death as a necessary part of the picture. That's why they ended up with distortions about Jesus being more of a supernatural character from heaven than a human being. The teachers were talking about Jesus' divinity and His teachings of how we should live life. They were not, however, teaching, in a balanced way, the realities of Jesus' suffering because they didn't want to have God get too involved in the suffering of human life. So how did John use the images of water, blood and Spirit to summarize the core of Christianity?

The **water**, for John, signified baptism – the belief that Jesus came into human life to save the world and to spiritually wash evil away. The **blood** symbolized Jesus' real death in time and human history on the cross. Jesus loved us enough to endure that violence. Reference to the **Spirit** was about God being within us – confirming and assuring us of God's eternal presence in our lives.<sup>5</sup>

Just as all three of these symbols were necessary to represent Christianity, John was trying to teach them that they can't just have one or two legs on a stool – just a belief in a Divine Character from heaven. As the church leaders affirmed in the coming generations, they realized that it was essential to believe that Jesus was a fully divine and fully human Being at the same time.

Today, all Christian congregations use the sacraments to remind us of Jesus' life. We perform rituals just to remember and proclaim what Christ did for us in history, yet the Spirit is the final witness to the truth.

John had previously written about how the Spirit is our teacher<sup>6</sup> and the revealer of truth<sup>7</sup> and here he was saying that God's Spirit confirms, within us, the truth about Christ. We come to accept the truth and it transforms our lives.

External evidence can not stand alone. In addition to our perceptions, we need an inner assurance of the truth of things – particularly because we quickly come to understand that we can not know everything.

All this is to say that our Christianity is a reasonable and logical faith, (as far as the historical witness goes), but because our faith touches on matters

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly the water and the blood could also signify the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

<sup>6</sup> 2:20,27

<sup>7</sup> 4:6

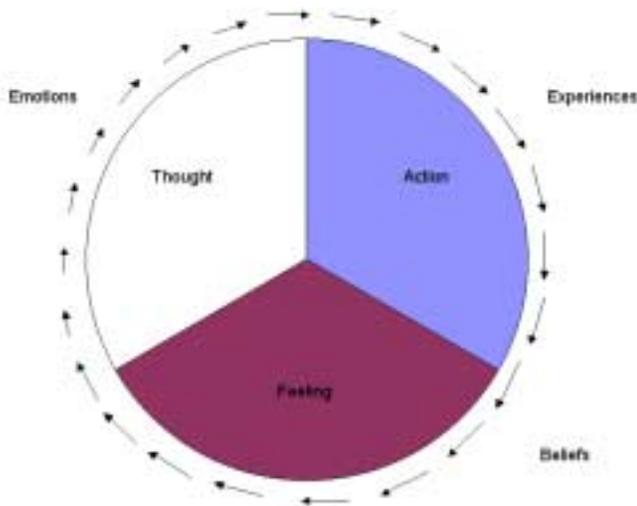
beyond the “natural” world,<sup>8</sup> we have faith in what goes beyond our ability to comprehend. We don’t believe in a *doctrine* but in a *Person*. The Christian believes in Christ, not in just a collection of theological concepts.

John finishes his line of thinking in verse 13, saying: “I’m writing this to you, who believe in the name of the Son of God – that you may know that you have eternal life.”

As you are sitting here this morning, do you know that God is actually present in your life’s experiences? “How is it that you know?” – someone will ask you as soon as you mention you believe in God.

As you stand back from what John is saying and if you’ve been in a couple of our adult study classes, you notice that John is covering the three basic components of one’s faith. You see these represented in the circle in your outline. The three aspects of human existence and certainly of the Christian faith, are ① **feeling**, ② **thought** and ③ **action**. It’s my sense that in order for us to have a healthy and mature spiritual life, we should strive for a balance in all three.

In your outline, the inner circle represents where we can ideally live with a balance of all three. The further out in the circle we go, the greater the risk we run in losing touch with the other components. That is, if we stay closely mindful of the importance of Christian thought, action and sensibility, we are centered in the middle and find spiritual balance.



Various denominations usually emphasize one (more than the others). If you haven’t noticed, we

<sup>8</sup> the scientific realm cause and effect world

Presbyterians can engage heavily into the **thought** part or the action part but we often run the risk of forgetting about the other two parts.<sup>9</sup> The same is true, however, of other religions. You know this from your own experiences. This is why some of us have made big changes in our religious practices.

I’ll digress, just to point out that in the bulletin outline, I listed four things we assume in our thinking – even before we start to talk about God and the supernatural of our Christian faith. But I dropped that material down into a footnote because it is too complex for a nice Spring morning. Check it out later if you will.

If you’ve been in a faith expression which emphasizes *one* aspect to the denial of the other two, you’ve probably felt as if you have outgrown it and you ended up making a swing to another extreme that met the deficiency. But when we were in that new faith expression, for a while, we may have found that it, as well, was missing something – missing the needed balance. We outgrow shallowness.<sup>10</sup> Which is why you

<sup>9</sup> People have come to refer to Presbyterian as the Jesuits of the Protestant faith

<sup>10</sup> Let’s step down the hallway, for a minute, and go in the philosophy classroom. In thinking about the areas of thoughts and beliefs, we have to admit that there are some things that we just assume and then go on. We presuppose some things as true because we could never actually prove them.

Through history, there have been man attempts to *prove* things about God and religion. Great thinkers like Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas, Augustan, Immanuel Kant and David Hume have tried to make it all a matter of reason. But the short of it is that we do have to assume some things. We never talk about our assumptions, but you and I, every day of our lives, assume these things in order to have conversations with others that make sense. First, we assume that most things in life make sense and are not always contradicting things we experience. This is the law of non-contradiction That is, when we talk with each other about anything, we assume that something can not be two different things at once, at the same time. People and things in our lives generally make sense and we are able to tell the difference between one thing and another. The little formula: “A = A, and A is not equal to Non-A” summarizes it. The elephant in the zoo is an elephant, not a Ford Escort.

The second thing we assume is that most things (except God) are caused by something else. This is the law of causality – more exactly, “every effect has a cause.” This is the assumption that every effect has a cause. When we see something that has happened, we assume something caused it.

If the ice cream truck missed our street, when it comes by every day in the summer, we assume there was a reason for that. We guess that the driver is sick, it’s a new driver who didn’t know the

shouldn't worry excessively about your children's faith expression. God will see to it that they'll get what they need.

So John is saying, in our text, that a Christian believes in the Incarnation of Christ Who was baptized, Who suffered and died for us. And very pointedly, one must believe in God Who came to us to enlighten us but also had to suffer and die in order that we encounter His real presence in history and in our life. As John was trying to straighten out some twisted teaching in this young church, first he emphasized the thoughts or the intellectual part of Christianity.

**Secondly**, in the circle of our faith, is **action or experience**. John is saying that he, and the other apostles, have been writing all this down about Jesus so that we would take this knowledge and do something in response.

James, as you know, emphatically emphasized the action part of our Christianity. Faith without experience, without appropriate action, is dead. A person who has all of the beliefs in their head but never acts on them, is spiritually dying. But Martin Luther thought James was overemphasizing this aspect.<sup>11</sup>

The **third** area of the circle is **feeling**, or in John's words, the inner confirmation of our beliefs. There is that point, in our faith, where we can have all of the matters of religious belief in our head but not in our hearts. There is that inner aspect of knowing the reality of God in our lives that comes upon us. John says that it is God's Spirit Who confirms the truth in our inner sense of things.

If there is any kind of order to this, it is perhaps a kind of movement depicted by the arrows around the

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route or the driver intentionally skipped our street.

The third assumption we make without talking about it is that what we see is usually what something actually is. This is the basic reliability of our sense perceptions. When you and I are sitting at a dinner table and I say "please pass the pepper," you and I can reliably know that our senses perceive the object of the pepper in the same way and you do, in fact, pass the pepper and not the potatoes.

And finally, with regard to religion, we all assume that God exists and that God is a personal Being who sees, knows and has communicated something about Self to people. Nobody can scientifically prove any of these things. We assume them to be true and move on.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther actually thought that the book of James shouldn't be in the Bible because it was way out on that part of the circle.

circle. It doesn't matter how it all starts. Perhaps we see someone showing Christi-like compassion for another. Maybe we come to hear about the truth of Christ in a way that it powerfully relates to our life experiences.

We can go in either or both directions at once. We try to put those thoughts and facts into practice with our actions or we may arrive at the inner sense, or conformation within ourselves, of the truth of Christ and then we act on it.

**There's no easy formula for encountering God, although there are plenty of people in the Christian church who insist and demand that there is.** The circle of interaction of our faith in Christ – in the context of our life's experiences – is a wonderfully complex dynamic. It is as profound and mysterious as a relationship between two people. But I'm suggesting that it comes down to this inner core of basics about Christ.

We hear it in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Church. It carries over into our experiences. God moves us to make it a reality in our life's choices. The reality of God in our lives, ultimately, becomes confirmed within the inner sanctum of our soul. All three elements are present but none of them should be to the exclusion of the others.

So John was trying to help that struggling church, at the turn of the first century, find a balance as it wrestled with difficult issues of orthodoxy and heresy. I suspect that we need this circle dynamic to find balance in our lives as we struggle to deal with the issues of our day. As Paul put it, "12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God Who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."<sup>12</sup>

It is to this balancing in our faith that the leaders of this church are committed. We are trying to keep the three elements of our thought, action and feelings balance and in doing so, it will cause us to live in a community characterized by love. This is what we need in order to make our way through life. It is to this kind of supportive and growing community we have been called.

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and the one

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:12-13

who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because God first loved us. . . . This commandment we have from God, that the one who loves God, should love their brothers and sisters as well.”<sup>13</sup> ■



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<sup>13</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:18-21